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RUEHZJ/HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RUCNISL/ISLAMIC COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RUEHIC/ORG OF ISLAMIC CONFERENCE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RUEHJI/AMCONSUL JEDDAH PRIORITY 0046

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SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT PASS TO NEA/ARP (HARRIS, BLONG), NEA/PPD  
(DOUGLAS, BENZE), NEA/IIP (DENIG), NEA/NESCA (HICKEY)

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TAGS: [OIIP](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SA](#)

SUBJECT: SAUDI ABUZZ WITH APPOINTMENT OF FEMALE DEPUTY  
MINISTER

Classified By: CDA Sandra Muench for  
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

KEY POINTS (SBU):

-- Saudi King Abdallah bin Abdulaziz exceeded reformists' hopes February 14 when he appointed Norah al-Faiz as one of two Deputy Ministers of Education. Al-Faiz, considered an expert on women's education, becomes the highest ranking female government employee. She will direct women's primary and secondary education kingdom-wide.

-- Saudis see Al-Faiz, former director of the Institute of Public Administration, as a moderate advocate for change with credibility founded on experience rather than the prominence of family connections. Working with the embassy, Al-Faiz has hosted women's empowerment workshops and supported US-based training for women.

-- The king's announcement quickly reverberated throughout Saudi society. News spread via television, radio, phone and text messaging. "It's a movement," said one contact.

END KEY POINTS.

11. (SBU) THE SURPRISE ANNOUNCEMENT: Saudi King Abdallah bin Abdulaziz reshaped his senior leadership today, February 14. His numerous changes targeted the judicial and education sectors, strongholds of conservatism in Saudi government. The most visible change comes with the appointment of the first female Deputy Minister. Norah al-Faiz, most recently the Director of the Institute of Public Administration, fills a newly-created position, Deputy Minister of Education for Women's Education. She will direct women's primary and secondary education.

12. (C) IMMEDIATE REACTION: Text messages flew and cell phones rang incessantly as Saudis learned of the news. "This signals change," said one contact. "It's a movement; people are feeling it," said another. "The first thing I'm going to do is go home, turn on the television, the radio and the computer," said a university professor. "I'm going to learn everything I can about it," she added.

13. (SBU) QUALIFICATIONS, NOT CONNECTIONS: As surprising as the Al-Faiz announcement was, Saudis noted that gender alone was not Al-Faiz's only distinguishing characteristic. Saudis took note that Al-Faiz is not from among the most prominent families. Although she is widely regarded as an "expert on girls' education," "she doesn't even have a PhD" noted one contact, "she only has a Masters degree." Throughout her career, Al-Faiz has supported training programs for women of

all levels of society. She collaborated with the embassy by hosting women's empowerment training via the US Speakers Program and nominating women for US-based training via the US Voluntary Visitors Program. Early in her career, Al-Faiz was a regular at US embassy functions.

¶4. (SBU) MORE ABOUT AL-FAIZ: Born in 1956, Norah al-Faiz hails from Shagra in conservative central Saudi Arabia. She received her bachelor's degree from King Sa'ud University and obtained her Masters degree in educational techniques from Utah State University. She departs her position at the well-respected Institute of Public Administration, an entity that provides English, computer and office management training to young Saudi women entering the job market. Under Al-Faiz's leadership, the Institute's service was in great demand: recently, 3000 women applied for 76 available openings. Prior to the Institute, Al-Faiz served as the girls' school principal for the private and prominent Kingdom Schools. Public opinion of Al-Faiz is positive. She is highly regarded among liberals and conservatives alike as a moderate voice for change. She carries with her a reputation as a strong and fair leader who is open-minded and hard-working.

¶5. (C) WHAT ARE CONSERVATIVES SAYING?: "Not a word" according to one contact. While moderates and liberals are hailing the significance of the moment, embassy contacts indicate that conservatives "must still be in shock."

MUENCH